JESSE SPOHNHOLZ. *The Convent of Wesel: The Event That Never Was and the Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii, 283. Cloth $99.99.

Starting in the early seventeenth century, Dutch Reformed thinkers began referring to a founding meeting of key theologians that stood at the beginning of their church's history: the 1568 Convent of Wesel. This purported event is documented by a list of theological propositions, written in a single hand and dated Wesel, November 3, 1568. Labeled in Latin as "Certain specific chapters or articles that in the service of the church of the Netherlands have been judged to be partly necessary and partly useful" (41) the document (whose authenticity is not in dispute) is signed by sixty-three individuals. The original now lies among other synodal documents in the Dutch Reformed Church's archives in Utrecht, while five early copies are located in other archives. The key historiographical problem surrounding the Convent of Wesel is that absolutely no other evidence survives for an actual meeting of theologians in Wesel: not in the city council and consistory records in Wesel, not in the correspondence of the many figures involved, and not in the minutes of subsequent, more thoroughly documented synods that one might expect to refer back to such a founding meeting.

In *The Convent of Wesel: The Event That Never Was and the Invention of Tradition*, Jesse Spohnholz meticulously traces the provenance, signers, and transmission of each of the six surviving versions of the “acts of the synod” in Wesel, from the late sixteenth century to the present. Drawing on archival material from Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries, England, and France, he demonstrates conclusively that the surviving document represents a single author’s ideas originally set to paper in Wesel, which was subsequently circulated to various other locations, notably Emden and London, to gather signatures. By the end of this examination, Spohnholz has persuasively debunked the idea that a group of Netherlandish Reformed leaders gathered clandestinely in Wesel late in 1568 to lay out plans for a new church in the Low Countries. No Synod or Convent of Wesel took place at all, and the document created and circulated in 1568 had no demonstrable impact on the later development of Dutch Calvinism (though its probable author, Petrus Dathenus, certainly did). In the course of his analysis, Spohnholz also shows how generations of historians from the 1620s to the 1980s concluded that such a meeting had in fact taken place and developed explanations for the absence of additional documentation—in the process revealing the historical canons of evidence to which they subscribed.

At one level, therefore, *The Convent of Wesel* represents a contribution to Dutch and European church historiography in the

longue durée, unpacking the way earlier thinkers sought authentic origins for their movement as they struggled over classical issues in Calvinist thought such as the authority of synods, the church's relation with secular authority, and what ecclesiastical roles might be open to women. As he lays out his analysis, Spohnholz displays a masterful knowledge of Dutch church history across three centuries, and his study will be useful for those studying both the early emergence and the later course taken by Calvinist thought in the Low Countries.

The book also makes a much broader contribution to historical methods, as signaled in the subtitle's evocation of "the invention of tradition," although Spohnholz's intervention goes in a quite different direction than Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's classic study *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). At stake is an important argument found in recent studies in the history of archives, namely that while historians have developed refined methods of *source* criticism, we have been much less systematic about *archival* criticism as an essential methodological practice. The argument, which seems plausible but is not easy to demonstrate, is that the archival transmission and contextualization of records over time is as important for their correct interpretation as are the conventional targets of source criticism, such as text, language, material form, authorship, and reception. Archival science has argued for over a century that documents need to be arranged and described in their context of original use—that is,

according to the principle of provenance—because that context is essential for understanding what individual documents mean, but historians have not always been attentive to such issues.

The Convent of Wesel delivers a powerful validation of archival criticism. Spohnholz builds his analysis of the history of the purported synod not by starting with the event but rather by focusing on the archival history of the documents that led various thinkers to conclude that there had been such an event. He traces the evolving meanings attributed to a single text across centuries of preservation in different contexts and of access by different readers. Close attention to archival transmission allows Spohnholz to offer sparkling insights into how various actors understood the piece of paper (original, copied, or printed) before them as they interpreted it, deployed it, and fit it into larger patterns of meaning. Thus it is that while one early copy in Wesel stands proudly as the first entry in a volume of *Acta Synodi* (sown between a printed introduction and printed documents from later synods), an Amsterdam copy with Mennonite provenance is described as recording a meeting in Paris, while a third in the German state archive in Detmold lies among “Various Items” and is not included in modern inventories at all. By examining a series of now-obscure divines, archivists, and historians from a critical perspective that helps us understand what they saw and how they influenced later interpreters, Spohnholz convincingly shows why we must consider not

only the texts of evidence from the past but also their archival trajectories if we wish to understand their meaning and deploy them as evidence ourselves.

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